

I Don't Believe in an Interventionist God (Actually I Do)

Now. There are songs you can't go round the seminary singing. Here's one, by Aretha Franklin. ("I just feel like a natural woman"). Well, many of you can sing that, but I have to try to stop myself. Then there's this one - here's the greatest ever opening line of a CD, by Nick Cave. ("I don't believe in an interventionist God").

"I don't believe in an interventionist God." Actually I do, but I haven't seen God intervening much lately, and I'm sad about it. The main reason I was so excited to meet the choir last year was because it reminded me that God intervenes. Y'all wouldn't be here today if God didn't intervene, right? You'd be dead or on Skid Row or in prison, or certainly miserable. God broke into your lives and did a miracle, right?

Now listen to the Bible.

Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you."

Abraham didn't believe in an interventionist God, but God took hold of Abraham. God intervened in her life.

The same thing happened to Hagar.

Sarai dealt harshly with Hagar, and she fled from her. The angel of the LORD found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur. He said, "Hagar,

made of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?"

Hagar didn't believe in an interventionist God. She believed she had to take control of her life and get back to Egypt. But God intervened in her life.

Then there was Naaman, the man who had a defiling skin disease.

Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, "Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean." But Naaman became angry and went away, saying, "I thought that for me he would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy!" But Naaman went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean.

Naaman did think that Elisha might have magical powers. But he didn't believe in an interventionist God. Until God intervened in his life.

Then there's something that James says.

Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven.

I don't know how James came to believe in an interventionist God, but he evidently did, and he wanted the people in the church to, especially when they got ill.

I do know when Paul came to believe in this kind of God.

Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

Paul was committed to serving God and he was putting all his energy into doing that. But God intervened in his life.

Now it's important to see the dynamic of what is happening in these stories, and lots of other stories in scripture. It wasn't that these people first of all believed in an interventionist God and that made it possible for God to intervene. It was that God first of all intervened and that made it possible for them to believe in an interventionist God. It wasn't that they were seeking God or listening to God. It was that God broke in when they were not listening or looking. In some cases they were desperate, in some cases they were running in the opposite direction, in some cases they were doing fine. God intervened because God decided to intervene.

Once, I didn't believe in an interventionist God. One Thursday, we were having a service in our seminary in England, with prayer for

healing, which we used to do once a quarter. I was praying for a student and I had a picture come into my head. Now in charismatic circles in Britain that was a way God sometimes intervened with people, but I knew I wasn't the kind of person who got pictures. I remember thinking, "If I were the kind of person who gets pictures, that would be a picture, but I'm not, so it isn't." But then I thought, "Maybe, just in case, I should work the images in the picture into the way I'm praying." You see this internal conversation is going on at the same time as I am praying for this student. After the service the student was so excited because the thing that had been so transformative about this event was the image I had used in my prayer, which had resonated with things in his life story that I knew nothing about. Before that evening, I didn't believe in an interventionist God, or rather I believed in an interventionist God, but I knew that I was outside the magic circles where God intervened, where God acted or spoke or revealed things. But God expanded the circle and made me part of it. And from then on, once every year or two, God would intervene with me in that way.

The strange thing is that God hasn't been doing that since I came to the U.S., and I don't have the impression that God intervenes much with other people here, either. Or if God does, we keep quiet about it. If we were to sum up what we think the Christian faith is about, it would not be about God intervening in our lives. What would it be? What do we think Christian faith is about?

I think there are three things. Some of us think that the central element in Christian faith is having a worldview, having a set of beliefs. Some of us think the central thing about Christian faith is striving for God's kingdom, working for peace and justice, seeking to spread the gospel. Some of us think the central thing about Christian

faith is a personal relationship, a relationship with Jesus that means we can share our hopes and fears with God and receive God's encouragement.

And all those things are important. But if the worldview doesn't give prominence to the interventionist God, it's got a hole at the center. If the personal relationship doesn't include God intervening in our lives as well as us talking to God in our heads, it's a one-sided relationship. And if God's kingdom depends on our action, that's just playing into our need to be in control, to fix things, to make a difference. All those things are important, but they are all empty without the interventionist God, not just a theory about an interventionist God but the experience of God intervening.

But as I said, the odd thing is that whereas God used to speak to me every year or two in Britain, God doesn't do that here in the same way. I don't mean I have any doubt about God being with us and with me, and I talk to God every day, and know God's sustaining in the tough aspects of life. But I don't see or hear God acting in those "Wow" ways, and I don't hear other people talking about God doing that.

Here's my image for the way we implicitly think of God. Imagine we having a service or a special event in the Congregational Church, and you know how they have a gallery, that's usually empty when we are there. It's as if the main part of the church is our lives, and God is up there in the gallery. There's no doubt that God is there and watching and keenly interested in what goes on. But God stays in the gallery. God doesn't come down into the main part of the building, where we are.

Why is that? We usually blame us. We use a variant on the freewill defense. It must be that we are preventing God intervening. We need to be more open to God. But in those stories in the Bible, those people weren't open to God. And anyway, what kind of a God would it be who could be prevented from intervening by us?

On the other hand, there is that other line in the letter of James about people not getting things from God because they don't ask for them. Isn't that one of the scariest verses in scripture? Maybe when you get sick you should ask the elders to come and anoint you and pray for you. Maybe it would even work sometimes. But we are afraid to do it because it may well not work. I have an experience of that that stands at the center of my life. God doesn't always intervene.

And that suggests another reason why we might not experience God intervening. Maybe we just live in the wrong place at the wrong time. Maybe God just happens not to have things to do through us at the moment.

Here's a further alternative possibility. Maybe God has abandoned us. In the Bible, God does abandon his people from time to time, sometimes for reasons you can see, sometimes for reasons you can't see. So maybe what we need to do is to start beseeching God, challenging God, to come back to us.

My story about that first picture I ever had illustrates another possibility. Maybe God does sometimes intervene and act or speak, but we don't realize that is what is going on. I came within an inch of simply dismissing that picture God gave me because I didn't think it could be a picture God was giving me. Maybe we should be more open to seeing that a thought or a suggestion or a picture that comes

into our heads does come from the interventionist God and not just issue from what we had for breakfast. We're afraid of that, too, because of the mistakes and the abuse it can lead to. So we miss out.

I believe in an interventionist God. In your heart, I suspect you do. Go and live like it.